

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 787

CG 026 185

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TITLE Parental Age and Parenting Quality: Comparing the USA and Trinidad.
SPONS AGENCY Florida International Univ., Miami.; Grant (W.T.) Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (102nd, Los Angeles, CA, August 12-16, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Rearing; Comparative Analysis; Disadvantaged Youth; Ethnic Studies; Foreign Countries; High Schools; High School Students; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parenting Skills; Questionnaires
IDENTIFIERS Trinidad and Tobago; United States

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade there had been increasing interest in the topic of deferred parenting. However, the effect on children of late timed parents has been a source of debate among researchers and practitioners. The present cross-cultural study explores the following questions: (1) is there an optimal age of parenting, and (2) are children of older parents disadvantaged? An anonymous questionnaire was administered to 415 undergraduates from diverse majors and ethnic groups in Miami (United States) and to 1,072 high school students of East Indian, African, and mixed ethnic groups in Trinidad, West Indies. Factor analysis yielded two major scales measuring adolescents' perception of parental enjoyment, support, energy, time, closeness, ability to confide in, ability to get along with, and overall rating. Results showed that adolescents from two substantially different cultures do not believe that they receive a lower affective quality of parenting from older parents than they do from younger parents, and suggest that there may be an optimal age for fatherhood and that this age varies across cultures. (SR)

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**PARENTAL AGE AND PARENTING QUALITY:
COMPARING THE USA AND TRINIDAD**

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**Poster presented at the 102nd Annual
Convention of the American Psychological Association,
Los Angeles, 1994.**

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**This research was supported by an Officer's Discretionary Award from the William T.
Grant Foundation and Florida International University Summer Research Awards.**

Abstract

Do children of older (over 35) parents perceive themselves to be disadvantaged by older parenting as claimed by Morris (1988)? Finley, Janovetz, and Rogers (1991) found: (1) no relationship between Perceived Affective Quality of Parenting (PAQP) and maternal age; (2) fathers aged 30-39 years were rated significantly higher than both younger and older fathers, which may suggest an optimal age for fatherhood; and (3) no support for Morris.

The present study used the Finley et al. (1991) methodology in Trinidad, West Indies (T) to examine the issues of an optimal age for fatherhood, as well as Morris' claim in a second culture. Similar to Finley et al. (1991) this study found: (1) no relationship between PAQP and maternal age; (2) a curvilinear relationship between PAQP and paternal age, however, the peak ages in T were from 20-29 rather than 30-39 as in the US; (3) no support for Morris and (4) that the only single item from the father PAQP which covaried with the Total PAQP across age in both cultures was the subjects' perception of their fathers' enjoyment in being fathers. These findings will be discussed in further detail.

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in the topic of deferred parenting. However, the effect on children of late timed parents has been a source of debate.

Morris (1988) received extensive media attention for her book titled Last-Chance Children: Growing Up with Older Parents. She concluded that the disadvantages of being reared by older (over 35) parents far outweighed the advantages. However, Finley, Janovetz, and Rogers (1991) found no support for her conclusions when they tested her claims: (1) with larger and more representative samples; (2) with children of younger as well as older parents; and (3) with questionnaires rather than unstructured interviews. Further, Finley et al. (1991) found that children's perception of the affective quality of parenting bore no relationship to maternal age, while there appeared to be an optimal age for fathering between 30 and 39 years.

The present study explored the cross-cultural generalizability of the Finley et al. (1991) United States (US) findings by adopting their methodology to test the Morris thesis in Trinidad, West Indies (T). Two issues were examined: First, is there an optimal age of parenting, and second, are children of older parents disadvantaged?

Method

The US subjects were 415 undergraduates from diverse majors and ethnic groups in Miami. The T subjects were 1,072 high school students of East Indian, African, and Mixed ethnic groups. The age range for students was: US = 16-41, $\bar{x}$ = 19; T = 13-19, $\bar{x}$ = 15. The fathers' age range at the birth of the child was: US = 16-55, $\bar{x}$ = 30; T = 13-66, $\bar{x}$ = 30. The mothers' age range at the birth of the child was: US = 13-41, $\bar{x}$ = 26; T = 13-54, $\bar{x}$ = 25.

An anonymous questionnaire was administered in class. To test Morris's conclusions, 26 fixed-response items were created to tap the major themes of her book. Factor analysis of these items yielded two major scales with 8 identical items each for father and mother. The scales were labeled Perceived Affective Quality of Parenting (PAQP) and were highly reliable in both cultures: Mother alpha (US = .88; T = .87) and Father alpha (US = .90; T = .89). The scales measured adolescents' perceptions of parental: enjoyment, support, energy, time, closeness, ability to confide in, ability to get along with, and overall rating.

Results and Discussion

Across both cultures, there was no significant relationship between maternal age and adolescent's perceptions of their mothers' affective quality of parenting. Thus, in two different cultures, there is no evidence that adolescents of older mothers perceive themselves to be disadvantaged compared to adolescents of younger mothers. For fathers, as seen in the upper portion of Table 1, there are both age and cultural differences in adolescents' views of the affective quality of fathering they received. In both cultures, there is a significant curvilinear relationship between the children's perceptions of their fathers' affective quality of parenting and paternal age. However, in the US, the peak PAQP for fathers was ages 30-39 while in T it was 20-29. US fathers in their 30's were rated more positively than both younger ($t = 2.3$, $df = 348$, $p < .02$), and older ($t = 2.3$, $df = 37$, $p < .03$) fathers. T fathers in their 20's were rated higher than younger fathers ($t = -2.1$, $df = 546$, $p < .05$) and fathers 30-39 ($t = 3.1$, $df = 937$, $p < .01$), but not the very oldest (40-66) fathers ($t = 1.5$, $df = 627$, $p = .14$).

Taken together, these results suggest that adolescents of older parents in both cultures do not perceive themselves as being disadvantaged when compared to those with younger parents. On the contrary, in both cultures, (1) there is no relationship with maternal age, and (2) some fathers over 35 are at or near the

peak PAQP age range in each culture (US = 35-39; T = 40-66). Finally, as suggested by Finley et al. (1991) for the US, the T results support the idea that there may be an optimal age range for fatherhood, although the optimal age range varies by culture.

The question then arises regarding why the optimal age varies across cultures. The only single PAQP item which covaried with the optimal age ranges in both cultures was the children's perception of their father's enjoyment in being fathers. In the US, 30-39 year old fathers were reported by their children as enjoying parenting significantly more than fathers of other ages. Similarly, T fathers aged 20-29 were rated significantly higher on this item than fathers of other ages (See Table 1).

There may be a three way relationship among paternal enjoyment, paternal involvement, and the adolescents' perception of their fathers' affective quality of parenting. In a separate study in the US, Finley, Stephenson, Williams & Janovetz (1993) found that 30-39 year old fathers self-reported more paternal gratification as well as more joy and satisfaction in fathering than both younger and older fathers. There also is some indication that late fathers engage more in the caretaking of their children (Daniels and Weingarten, 1982; Nydegger, 1981). Further, Neville (1993) reported that older fathers may be more cognitively and affectively involved with their children, while younger fathers tend to engage in more physical activities.

A similar but weaker relationship was found in T. Flinn (1992) found that fathers less than 25 years and greater than 54 years had a greater percentage of father involvement with their children than fathers of other ages. However, this study was based on a small sample in a very small village in T and requires replication.

The age at which fathers experience paternal enjoyment may be dependent on circumstances within the culture. In the US, fathers 30-39 tend to be more flexible and stable due to educational and employment achievements. According to Neville (1993) these circumstances may reduce conflicts between home and career demands. In T, adolescents reported having more support in the home from other adults for fathers 20-29 and fathers 40 and over, more so than other fathers. The availability of additional support may lessen the demands on these fathers allowing for more time to interact with their children. Flinn (1993) also reported that fathers who interacted more frequently with their children appeared "less busy" than other fathers (p.73). Additional research is needed in Trinidad to confirm these findings.

Conclusions

In conclusion, adolescents from two substantially different cultures do not believe that they receive a lower affective quality of parenting from older parents than they do from younger parents. It is unfortunate that Morris's (1988) work created a negative media image of older parents. This negative image requires correction because it is misleading and damaging both to older parents and to prospective older parents.

The present study along with the data from Finley et al. (1991) suggest that there may be an optimal age for fatherhood and that this age varies across cultures. There also appears to be a three way relationship among self-reported enjoyment in being a father, a father's frequency of interaction with his child, and the child's perception of the father's Affective Quality of Parenting. The frequency of contact with children by their fathers may depend on factors within the culture that allow fathers more time to spend with their children. These factors may include education and career status, as well as additional support from other adults.

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Table 1

Perceived Affective Quality and Enjoyment of Fathering by
Culture and Age of Father at Child's Birth

	Age of Father				
Culture	13-19	20-29	30-39	40 +	F
Affective Quality of Fathering:					
US	3.4	3.8	4.0	3.6	3.5 *
(N)	(6)	(190)	(160)	(31)	
T	3.3	3.7	3.5	3.6	4.2 **
(N)	(26)	(522)	(417)	(107)	
Enjoyment of Fathering:					
US	3.7	4.2	4.5	4.2	3.7 *
(N)	(6)	(190)	(160)	(30)	
T	3.8	4.2	4.0	4.1	3.0 *
(N)	(26)	(521)	(415)	(106)	

Note. Scale Range = 1-5; High score = High Affective Quality/Enjoyment of Fathering

US = United States; T = Trinidad, West Indies

*P < .05 **P < .01